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Chapter Author(s): John H. Hanson

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5 Religions in Africa

John H. Hanson

Spirit possessions, harvest festivals, and other activities associated with African traditional religions (or religions with African roots) remain vital, but attendance at Christian churches and Muslim mosques in Africa has increased significantly during the last century. From 1900 to 2010 the number of Christians in Africa grew from less than 10 million to 470 million, more than 20 percent of the world Christian community. The number of Muslims in Africa also grew to more than 450 million, over 25 percent of the global Muslim community. This chapter discusses the endurance of religions with African roots and how Africans have accepted, proselytized, and elaborated upon Christianity and Islam during the past two hundred years.

DEFINITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Religion refers to ideas and practices concerning societal relations with unseen powers. It is associated with prophecies, moral directives, and explanations of the world, and religious followers forge bonds with others through rituals, experience ecstatic states in trances, and obtain healing and comfort through rituals, supplications, and other activities. The complete range of religious experiences is difficult to study, but scholars can analyze religious ideas and discuss the roles and actions of religious specialists and their followers in specific times and places.

Religions with African roots were the first on the continent and shaped the religious landscape. They often recognize a creator god and accessible spiritual forces that ritual specialists can contact in specific places or call to become manifest in individuals or objects such as masks or statues. Public rituals engage these unseen forces, and private consultations draw on them to provide individual assistance. European colonialism disrupted and sometimes prohibited these religious activities in early twentieth-century Africa, so current expressions are best understood as contemporary constructions evoking local ideas and practices in complex ways.

Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions based on scriptures. The Bible and Qur'an provide believers with moral guidance as well as a warning that human existence will culminate in an end-of-time when God will judge humans and grant access to heaven only to those deemed worthy. Early Christians established doctrines and ecclesiastical organizations in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and Protestant denominations emerged during the European Reformation. Early Muslims never founded overarching religious organizations, and they largely agreed on the primacy of the Qur'an and the Traditions (reports of the Prophet Muhammad's actions and deeds) and a few core rituals, such as daily prayers, as the basis of the faith. Nevertheless, divisions in the Muslim world emerged, for example, between Sunni and Shi'i traditions. Theological and ritual elaboration continues in both Christianity and Islam, as one would expect in religions welcoming new converts.

The term "syncretism" often is used in reference to elaborations of Islam and Christianity in Africa, but the word conveys an inaccurate impression that Africans somehow fall short of ideals when in reality no "pure" form of any religion exists. Christians and Muslims in all times and places put religion to work in their lives by interpreting scriptures and augmenting ritual practices. Historical research reveals, for example, that core elements of Christian worship, such as praise singing and supplication through prayer, have roots in the ancient, pre-Christian Mediterranean world as well as the religious practices of early Christians. African converts to Christianity and Islam similarly reject their previous religions and enrich their new faiths with interpretations and expressions drawing on meaningful local ideas and practices.

RELIGIONS WITH AFRICAN ROOTS

Religions with African roots historically have been the most numerous religions on the continent. Most did not leave behind written records, but scholars have uncovered evidence of their ideas, practices, and influence on social processes in the pre-colonial era. Acknowledgement of a creator god as well as lesser gods and spirits was widespread, but specific understandings and religious practices varied. Spiritual forces often were associated with localities, including hills, rocks, and sacred forests, but spirits also could become manifest in portable objects such as masks and sculptures, as the chapter on visual art in Africa discusses. In some contexts, religious specialists were mediums who could call spirits; in others they were prophets who merely received messages, and in still others they were diviners who could foretell the future. Most societies distinguished between religious specialists working for the common good and those working for private interests and directing unseen forces against others. Sometimes specific roles were reserved for men and others for women, but gender specializations were not uniform across the continent. Religious specialists could be from families with long-standing ties to the community, but they also could be people from outside, whose social and physical distance added to their authority.

The social functions of religions with African roots were multiple. Some rituals healed the ill or cured the infertile, as the chapter on health and healing in Africa discusses. Others had “ordeals” identifying wrongdoers or mass campaigns to identify asocial persons believed to be witches. Still others aimed at rainmaking. Political leadership also had rituals, such as those associated with the installation of new leaders in office or the commemoration of locally significant events. These activities often were conservative, reinforcing certain ideas about proper behavior or merely celebrating community solidarity, but they could produce social change. For example, rainmaking processes allowed for public commentaries on the efficacy of leaders and could inspire political action by encouraging the ouster of a leader perceived not to be fulfilling the common good. In other contexts, where chiefs had installation ceremonies associated with objects such as stools, rituals existed to remove or “destool” a leader. Not all practices perform the same work, but all religions are intertwined in social processes.

Religions with African roots changed over time. The absence of documentary information makes specific changes difficult to reconstruct, but borrowing from other religions is one indicator. For example, Ifa, one of many local religious cults in coastal areas from Ghana to Nigeria, is a form of divination that draws significantly from Islamic practices known as “sand writing”; Ifa’s specialists either borrowed the new practice or adapted elements of Islamic sand writing to their own divination practices. Another example of religious change occurred in the herding areas of today’s Kenya and Tanzania, where Maasai peoples currently reside. Ritual specialists performed regular initiations of Maasai youths into adulthood, and many Maasai women supplicated Eng’ai, the high god, as part of their daily religious activities. In the nineteenth century new religious roles emerged during a time of expansion as specific Maasai groups claimed more territories and incorporated others into their communities. Integral to this process were prophets, *iloibonok*, who aided particular Maasai groups in claiming territories and asserting authority over others absorbed into growing Maasai communities during these nineteenth-century transformations.

European Colonial Intervention and Consolidation

In some regions religious specialists became involved in armed struggles against European imperialism. One example occurred in today’s Tanzania during the colonial consolidation, after the German administration had imposed taxation and began promoting rubber harvesting and cotton cultivation. The trigger was a severe drought in 1905, after which many rural residents rose up against colonial intermediaries and eventually fought German armies. Various groups were involved, but the movement came to be known as Maji-Maji in reference to the potion religious specialists made from water (*maji*) and other items for followers to ingest for protection against German bullets. Kinjikitile Ngwale, the spirit medium who first concocted *maji* protections, and other ritual specialists associated with the movement were captured and killed by Germans as they forcefully put down the



Figure 5.1. Dogon dancer in late twentieth-century Mali.
Corbis.

resistance. Another example occurred in today's Burkina Faso in 1915–17, as local populations took advantage of the First World War to rise up against the French at a time of perceived military weakness. Diverse communities worked together in the effort to organize and fight, drawing on religious specialists controlling a network of local shrines. In this case, Muslims joined non-Muslims in making common cause against an enemy, and both were targeted by the French and died in this failed effort.

The changes of the colonial era influenced local religious practices. European colonial officers encouraged a number of rituals that they assumed consolidated authority for African intermediaries in the colonial administration, but in some cases these ceremonies were “invented traditions” and not linked to a continuous cultural practice. Europeans also actively discouraged or outlawed certain practices deemed controversial or a challenge to their rule, driving them out of public sight. As religious specialists receded from view, many likely modified or truncated their religious practices. For example, specialists who previously had dealt with a broad range of public healing turned merely to infertility in individual cases; the chapter on health and healing reveals the vibrancy of these practices. Some religions with African roots continued, occasionally under the cover of secrecy in the colonial era, and elements of local religious practices remained a resource for contemporary artistic and musical expressions, political ceremonies, and other activities. For example, Dogon communities in contemporary Mali organize dances with masks on a regular basis and invite outsiders to witness some of their rites and ceremonies.

Some religions with African roots were able to expand in the colonial era. For example, in the northeastern region of today's Ghana, a complex of ancestor and earth shrines in the Tong hills was targeted by the British as a source of subversion to their rule. British officials sent a military force, then tried destroying the caves, and finally relocated African populations residing near the complex in an effort to eliminate the shrines. The British relaxed restrictions in the 1920s, and one of these ancestor cults, Tongnaab, thrived in a new network of shrines in southern Ghana, where other ethnic groups turned to it for witch-finding under the name Nana Tonga. As some Africans gained wealth and no longer acknowledged social obligations, accusations of witchcraft increased, and Nana Tonga's reputation for finding witches was enhanced by the local perception that the northern regions were without asocial people due to the efficacy of their gods. Transformations in Tongnaab and Nana Tonga continue to this day, as its network of shrines remains active and tourists from outside Ghana visits the Tong hills.

The colonial era included the appropriation of Christian symbols by religions with African roots. For example, in Gabon beginning in the 1920s, a movement known as Bwiti established a network of chapel houses emphasizing egalitarianism bolstered by rituals and other shared religious experiences. Ancestors figured prominently in Bwiti, as did initiations during which a local hallucinogenic substance was consumed in a ritual involving singing and dance. While a central religious experience in Bwiti was an encounter with Jesus Christ, this figure was not the “son of

God” of Christian teaching but represented as a local healer. Some members of Bwiti had been educated in Christian missionary schools, but neither they nor other followers of Bwiti would claim to be Christians. Bwiti is a religion with African roots that appropriated Christian symbolism to lend it relevance and authority in the changed circumstances of the colonial era. It drew on ideas and practices of deep historical resonance and engaged Christianity’s expansion with its complex rituals and symbolism.

Recent Developments

Religions with African roots are diminishing in influence due to the recent expansion of Islam and Christianity in Africa. Evangelical Pentecostal and charismatic churches, for example, often define “traditional” African religious ideas and practices as “evil,” and these churches have been successful in eliminating many such expressions in public contexts. The evocative power of these local religions nevertheless remains significant, as the chapters on art and music in Africa discuss. Private consultations with religious specialists also continue, as religions with African roots still offer compelling messages and offer healing and other services to Africans.

Accusations of witchcraft persist in contemporary Africa, raising questions about the relations between these claims and current practices. Note that accusations and actual involvement in the occult are distinct. In some cases there are personal accounts of possession by evil spirits, but these narratives cannot be corroborated and the confession itself often is an aspect of joining a Christian movement or a Pentecostal congregation. More than one person has made sensational claims to have ritually killed someone as part of his or her “evil” past, only to recant when confronted by authorities. Allegations of witchcraft nonetheless are real, as periods of social change often produce outbreaks of widespread public fear and resentment of individuals who do not share social norms with others. Contemporary witch-finding practices often draw on evocative symbols and practices from the past, but one cannot project a continuous tradition of African witchcraft over the centuries. Africa, in other words, may experience periodic waves of witch-finding, but it is not necessarily inhabited by witches.

CHRISTIANITY

Some of the first Christian communities were in northern Africa. Alexandria, in the lower Nile valley, was an early Christian religious center, and other towns to the west were significant, such as Hippo in today’s Algeria, where Augustine wrote his influential theological works. Christianity declined in northern Africa as local populations of Copts and Berbers adopted Arabic and converted to Islam in the centuries after the Arab conquests of the seventh century. Several Christian communities remain in northern Africa, such as the Coptic Church in Egypt, but Orthodox Christianity’s major African presence is in Ethiopia. Rulers of Axum, a highland Ethio-

pian state and regional commercial power, converted to Christianity in the fourth century CE. Through the subsequent activities of Christian monks as well as the support of Ethiopian political elites over the centuries, Christianity thrived and expanded in the highlands. Today with some forty million members, the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church, an autonomous branch in the Orthodox Christian tradition, has its own saints and religious festivals, liturgies in Ge'ez (an ancient Semitic language with origins in the highlands), and religious icons.

Nineteenth-Century Missionary Efforts

The nineteenth century brought sustained efforts to expand Christianity in Africa. Europeans had established Catholic missions in previous centuries, after the initial voyages of exploration of the fifteenth century, but success often eluded them, except in contexts such as Kongo, where the king converted and a local Christian community emerged with its own saints. The nineteenth century witnessed an upsurge in missionary activities: Catholics continued their efforts and Protestants increased their involvement, moved in part by religious revivals in late eighteenth-century Europe and North America. This new evangelism combined with long-standing efforts to abolish slave trading in Africa. David Livingstone, a nineteenth-century Scottish missionary and explorer who wrote about his work in Africa, inspired many others to follow his example. Using European coastal trading enclaves as points of access to the continent, Christian missionaries obtained plots of land from African leaders and sought to establish new communities of Christian converts.

Christianity grew most effectively when African converts spread the message. Receptivity to Christianity initially occurred at the top or bottom ranks of African societies. Royalty sometimes converted and encouraged their subjects to follow; literacy and access to commodities, as much as Christian beliefs and rituals, often were the attractions for African elites. Christianity also appealed to the downtrodden, such as in contexts where warfare produced uprooted people seeking new beginnings. Among the most successful nineteenth-century missionaries were recent African converts. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, for example, was enslaved in today's southern Nigeria in 1821, liberated from a slave ship, and released by the British navy at Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he converted to Christianity; Crowther returned to Nigeria to proselytize and rose to the rank of bishop in the growing Anglican community of late nineteenth-century Nigeria. Crowther and other African Christians spoke from individual experiences and articulated the message in local languages. They also persisted in the faith, even after tropical diseases claimed significant numbers of the first European missionaries in Africa. Martyrdom faced some early converts: in Buganda, for example, Christian and Muslims competed for influence at the capital during the late nineteenth century, and a shift in support led to the deaths of several African Catholics, who are remembered to this day in an annual ceremony in Uganda. The nineteenth century did not bring large numbers of Africans into the fold, but it laid the groundwork for Christian expansion in the century that followed.

European Colonial Intervention and Consolidation

The relations between Christianity and European colonial rule in Africa are complex. The colonial “civilizing mission” was close to the Christian vision for Africa, and some European missionaries encouraged African elites to sign treaties and ally with European powers during the late nineteenth century. Missionaries associated with influential congregations in the metropole tended to be favored by colonial officials in Africa—Catholics in French colonies and Protestants in British colonies, for example—although all Christian denominations were present to some degree throughout the continent. Missionary organizations began to mirror the social and racial hierarchies of colonialism, as additional European missionaries arrived and pushed African converts from leadership positions beginning in the late nineteenth century. But some missionaries criticized the abuses of imperial conquest and colonial consolidation. Ironically, European colonial officials supported African political leaders who sustained local religious rituals condemned by the missionaries. In some cases, colonial authorities even prevented Christian missionaries from proselytizing in regions with significant Muslim populations, such as the northern regions of Nigeria.

Colonial rule created fertile ground for conversion to Christianity. European conquests raised questions about the efficacy of religions with African roots, and colonial consolidation encouraged Africans to seize the opportunities associated with Christianity. Missionary schools offered literacy in European languages, a skill that Africans could put to use as clerks in colonial bureaucracies or European firms. As Africans were looking afresh at Christian mission schools, European missionaries were altering strategies and targeting children for conversion: these circumstances meshed and produced a young generation of converts in the early colonial era. Conversions of adults still occurred too. In Rwanda, for example, many tens of thousands of farmers joined the Catholic Church in the 1930s, following the example of elites who had been converted by missionaries during earlier decades. And serendipity could play a role. In the northwestern regions of today’s Ghana, conversions of farmers occurred when it rained on a Catholic mission after an Irish missionary promised it would during a local drought; the children of these converts attended missionary schools and became the social base for a dynamic Catholic community in this region.

Some Africans split from mission churches and founded new congregations, usually called African independent churches. Led by African clergy, these churches went by different names but shared many features, such as a more vibrant ritual life and belief in the role of the Holy Spirit acting through living prophets. The Aladura or “praying churches” of Nigeria, for example, formed in the early colonial period out of the Christian prayer circles of missionary school graduates who held administrative jobs in the colonial towns of southern Nigeria. Under the guidance of charismatic African clergy, prayer circles developed into new churches, expanded into rural areas, and added an emphasis on drumming and healing rituals, activities that were



Figure 5.2. African independent church baptism in mid-twentieth-century South Africa. *Corbis.*

prohibited at mission churches at the time. African independent churches in southern Africa, often called Zionist churches, also emphasized the role of African prophets and local symbolism; some of these Zionist congregations became involved in the struggle against the system of racial discrimination known as apartheid.

Scholars often refer to the religious transformations associated with African independent churches as the “Africanization” of Christianity. This term has merit, as it draws attention to ways Africans appropriated the message and reoriented rituals to make them relevant to their lives. But it is misleading to say that African independent churches are more African than churches that did not experience the rupture of separation. On one hand, mission churches eventually engaged in discussions about liturgy and leadership, with internal reform gradually leading to the liberalization of services and liturgies and to the elevation of Africans to leadership positions. Today these former mission churches, often called “mainline” churches, are run by Africans who retain affiliations to the Catholic or Protestant communities of the initial missionaries. On the other hand, emphasis on Africanization obscures the ways that European missionaries were transformed by their experiences in Africa. Recent work reveals how cross-cultural exchanges served to influence European Christian practices in metropolitan contexts during the twentieth century.

African women converted to Christianity in large numbers and became influential members of many congregations during the twentieth century. In Botswana, for example, Christian missionary efforts initially converted the male elite of the Ngwato state in the late nineteenth century, but by the 1920s Tswana women dominated membership and actively promoted social causes such as temperance. Their religious activities were a transformation of expected gender roles in Tswana society, where women had brewed beer and been excluded from the public sphere. Women also played significant roles in congregations that broke from missionary churches. In Kenya, for example, large numbers of women were moved by the preaching of Alfayo Odongo Mango, founder of the Roho Holy Spirit movement, an African independent church. These women preserved Roho beliefs and practices after Mango died in a fire set by the movement's enemies in 1934; their hymns, songs, and ecstatic visions are the core of the Ruwe Holy Ghost Church, the successor to the Roho movement.

Translating the Bible into African languages was critical to the expansion of Christian communities. Some translations were by Europeans knowledgeable in African languages, but most missionaries relied on African converts as their assistants, and in some cases Africans took the lead in translation. In Uganda, for example, Baganda Christian converts took the lead in translating the Bible into Luganda and carried the new translations far and wide in a successful missionary crusade during the early twentieth century. Their translations incorporated local words for "high god" and other religious expressions; more importantly, they allowed local religious ideas and practices to permeate the sacred text of Christianity. Translated Bibles had other influences too. Once a translation of the Bible had been made, that specific dialect of the African language became the standard over time. For example, after African missionaries disseminated a Bible translated into Yoruba in nineteenth-century southern Nigeria, not only did its dialect of Yoruba become the accepted version of that language, but the Bible and local missionary activities contributed to the construction of a wider Yoruba identity that previously had not been acknowledged by speakers of the numerous dialects of this language.

Recent Developments

The most notable Christian development of the past three decades is the phenomenal growth in evangelical Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa. The genesis of these churches was in the colonial era, as the Assemblies of God and others founded missions in Africa, but significant expansion occurred in the postcolonial context, often at the expense of African independent and mainline churches. African ministers in Pentecostal and charismatic churches draw on African interpretations of Pentecostal teachings to stress personal deliverance, baptism by the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, prayer healing, and exorcism of demonic forces. In addition, they use mass media to present themselves as "modern": their loudly broadcast church services define their presence and preach a "prosperity gospel" linking material and spiritual prosperity to personal intervention by God.

Some congregations actually provide mechanisms for economic advancement, such as loans to poorer members to start businesses, but their interpretation stresses God's intervention to ensure financial success, and the religious leadership often engages in conspicuous consumption of expensive clothing, luxury cars, and up-to-date electronic equipment as representations of God's blessings. Global connections also influence these Pentecostal and charismatic churches, with frequent exchanges of visiting evangelists between Africa and North America.

Some scholars associate the rise of evangelical Pentecostal and charismatic churches with the diminishing economic possibilities in many African nations during the 1970s and 1980s. The promise of God's blessing is alluring at times of widespread financial hardship. Others note that newly wealthy Africans are attracted to an exclusive spiritual community that reduces their need to fulfill kinship obligations to family outside the congregations. Global exchanges also are valued in an increasingly interconnected world. These sociological observations do not diminish the strong sense of religious community among "born-again" individuals attending the Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa.

The mainline Christian churches have not remained static. Many congregations have adopted practices associated with Pentecostal and charismatic churches, such as the use of new media and speaking in tongues. The charismatic movement in the Catholic tradition, for example, has emerged with vigor in the African context as well as elsewhere in the world. African Christians are writing theological works that elaborate on the message for a new generation. Some of these African leaders have gained a following outside the continent, especially in Protestant congregations in the United States, where national bodies have adopted controversial positions on contemporary social issues and stirred opposition in some communities. Some understand these contemporary African engagements with scripture as hewing closely to the Bible's textual injunctions, but all interpretations are social constructions and cannot definitively be portrayed as more or less "biblical."

African Christian groups occasionally use violence to advance their cause. Alice Auma, for example, founded an African independent church known as the Holy Spirit Movement in the northern regions of Uganda during the 1980s. Claiming to be a prophet receiving messages from the Holy Spirit, Auma began by casting off witches, but she eventually formed a militia, the Holy Spirit Mobile Force, to defend the Acholi ethnic community from the Ugandan central government during a time of civil disorder. Auma claimed that spreading blessed shea butter on followers would protect them from harm, and she led the Holy Spirit Mobile Force to several victories in 1987. Her forces were defeated, however, by the Ugandan army in 1988 as they marched to the capital, Kampala: Auma fled to Kenya, but Joseph Kony, one of her lieutenants and a former Catholic altar boy who claimed to be possessed by spirits, convinced remnants of Auma's militia and other dissidents to fight an insurgent campaign under his leadership. Kony's movement, the Lord's Resistance Army, abducted children to serve as its soldiers and ordered the murder or mutilation of suspected enemies in the civilian population. After a decade of atrocities, the Lord's

Resistance Army signed a truce with the Ugandan government in 2006, and Kony and his followers withdrew to the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the Lord's Resistance Army has continued its activities. This movement was the topic of an internet movie, *Kony 2012*, an ahistorical presentation that obscured more than it revealed.

Christianity has a long history in Africa. It began in the early centuries in towns such as Alexandria and Hippo, was sustained in contexts such as Ethiopia, and expanded during the last two hundred years as foreign missionaries and African converts spread the faith and translated the Bible into African languages. African prophets also emerged to form African independent churches inspired by the Bible, and more recently evangelical Pentecostal and charismatic churches stress the active role of the Holy Spirit in Africa. Christianity had wider influences, as mission schools provided education that was not widespread in colonial Africa. Diverse manifestations of Christianity currently exist in Africa, creating opportunities for dialogue and competition between various churches.

ISLAM

Africa was involved in the history of Islam from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, who reportedly sent some members of the early Muslim community to the highlands Ethiopian state of Axum for refuge from Arabian opponents of the faith. Muslims emerged as majority populations north of the Sahara after the Arab Muslim conquests of the seventh century: over several generations local populations of Copts and Berbers gradually adopted Arabic, appropriated Arab identities, and converted to Islam. Muslim merchants crossed the Sahara Desert and the Indian Ocean, converting local residents who in turn proselytized to others. Initial converts in sub-Saharan Africa often were merchants, and the relations between Islam and commerce remained intertwined for centuries. Political elites and others also converted, but this development was limited to the savannas just south of the Sahara and the coastal areas of eastern Africa. Most Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa kept African languages and local identities: societal adoption of Arabic occurred in only a few regions, such as the upper Nile valley of northern Sudan and in the westernmost Sahara (today's Mauritania). Along the eastern African coast, for example, African Muslims speak Kiswahili, a Bantu language with Arabic loan words. Kiswahili-speaking coastal elites, African in origin, converted to Islam beginning in the tenth century CE, and Islamic practices thereafter were influenced by local Muslim scholars as well as Muslim visitors and immigrants from Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia. Across the continent African Muslims participated in networks carrying people, texts, and ideas in all directions. Ibn Battuta, the fourteenth-century Moroccan Muslim traveler who logged more miles than Marco Polo, was merely the most notable traveler: numerous Africans went on pilgrimages and embarked on long-distance commercial ventures over the centuries.

Revival, Reform, and Empire-Building during the Nineteenth Century

Islamic revival and reform were a major current in the nineteenth century. Muslims in many regions began to question established notions of Islamic religiosity and emphasize the moral example of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Some reformers founded new organizations to provide religious education and social services. These ideas and organizational innovations were not accepted by all Muslims, and reformers sometimes disputed among themselves, creating numerous movements that competed for followers.

Sufi orders were on the forefront of Muslim revival and reform in Africa. Sufism is a spiritual discipline in which disciples seek enlightenment through rituals, such as reciting litanies, in hopes of experiencing proximity to God. Reformist Sufi leaders used the organizational structure of orders to create new communities that offered spiritual instruction and assistance in social and economic activities. In the Horn of Africa, for example, Sufi orders integrated people dislocated from the clan-based societies of the region into new settlements offering Islamic education and coordinating farming and trade. Some Somali Sufi orders were exuberant in expression and allowed sensual stimulation through drinking coffee and drumming at devotional activities; others condemned these practices and performed austere rituals in their communities. Sufi orders expanded elsewhere: in northern Africa, where the tradition had a long history and was revitalized in the nineteenth century, and in regions stretching from Senegal to Sudan and along the eastern coast of Africa, where Sufism often was a new religious orientation.

Sufi orders could become involved in political activism. The Arabic word *jihad* means religious effort or struggle, and it can be interpreted as nonviolent religious advocacy or internal spiritual development, but one important interpretation is jihad as armed action in defense of Islam. In the nineteenth century this latter meaning gained currency for some Sufi leaders. For example, Umar Tal, a resident of what today is Senegal and the leader of the Tijaniyya Sufi order in West Africa, called upon his disciples to fight non-Muslim elites in present-day Mali. Umar followed in the steps of an earlier Muslim leader, Uthman dan Fodio, whose call to military jihad in the early nineteenth century led to the creation of an expansive Sokoto Caliphate covering much of today's northern Nigeria. The Muslim states founded by Uthman and Umar fought religious wars against non-Muslims, and captives were enslaved as domestic servants and on large plantations, freeing Muslim elites to pursue religious activities, such as writing Sufi poetry in Arabic and vernacular languages. Nineteenth-century military jihad movements created several states led by Muslim leaders, establishing a legacy that informs political developments to this day in northern Nigeria and elsewhere.

Other Muslims also engaged in empire building during the nineteenth century. Muslim dynasties founded by Muhammad Ali in Cairo and by the Bu Saidi family of Oman in Zanzibar created extensive empires and encouraged commercial adventurers who raided south of Egypt and west of Zanzibar, respectively, in search of

ivory and slaves. The slaves worked on plantations in the imperial heartlands, where they produced crops such as cloves for world markets. Sufi orders operated in the margins, often integrating the uprooted into new Muslim communities. In Egypt's northern Sudan territories, for example, Muhammad Ahmad, often referred to as the Mahdi because of his claims to be the "guided one" of Islamic eschatology, rose up and organized an armed movement that defeated Egyptian overrule in the late nineteenth century.

European Colonial Intervention and Consolidation

European powers confronted Muslim political leaders during the late nineteenth-century colonial intervention, co-opting some elites and conquering others. In Egypt Britain maintained the royal dynasty as it established hegemony over the country in the 1880s, but in the Sudan Britain fought against the Mahdi and defeated Abdallah, his successor, who died with approximately twenty thousand Muslims in the 1898 battle against the British at Omdurman. European intervention sometimes led Muslims to wage guerrilla campaigns, such as in Algeria and Somalia, where Sufi leaders mounted a challenge to colonial rule for several decades before Europeans finally defeated them. Some Muslims migrated to Arabia to avoid living under European colonial rule. Still others resigned themselves to colonialism, withdrew from political affairs, and focused on spiritual matters. The responses of Umar Tal's relatives ran the spectrum, from those who fought and died against the French to others who worked with colonial administrations and those, such as Umar's grandnephew Bokar Salif Tal, who devoted himself to expanding Islam through his Sufi teachings among populations Umar had conquered years earlier.

Some Muslim elites maintained close relations with European administrations and shaped the colonial experience. For example, in the former Sokoto Caliphate, Muslims came to an understanding with the British after the sultan fought against the colonial invasion: Britain retained Muslim elites in office and allowed the exercise of Islamic law and other aspects of the previous order but imposed control in some areas, such as abolishing certain kinds of corporal punishment and gradually ending slavery in northern Nigeria. Similar elite accommodation emerged elsewhere, such as between Britain and the Omani elite in Zanzibar. More ambiguous were the relations between the French and Amadu Bamba, a Sufi leader in Senegal. Bamba tried to keep his distance from politics, but his ability to attract disciples, including former slaves, brought French suspicion, two periods of forced exile from Senegal, and house arrest until his death in 1927. Bamba's order, the Muridiyya, eventually gained French acceptance and was able to expand, engaging in cash-cropping for material support while continuing an emphasis on Islamic education.

The number of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa grew during the European colonial era. Colonial accommodations of Muslim elites created respectability for Islam in some regions, but nothing replaced inspired preaching as the primary way

to win new converts. Sufi leaders welcomed newcomers such as former slaves into their orders, offering outsiders access to new communities based on religion and not class or kinship. Sufi leaders composed poetry in vernacular languages, included local cultural expressions such as dancing and drumming at their devotional sessions, and developed organizations that supported the expansion of cash-cropping or commercial activities. They also drew on local expectations that religious leaders could heal the ill, and they provided herbal cures and made amulets from verses of the Qur'an for spiritual protection. Some leaders came from established Muslim scholarly lineages, but Sufism's emphasis on spiritual matters meant that pious disciples could rise quickly, and several leaders came from humble backgrounds. And while Sufi leaders constructed their organizations locally, they had connections with global Sufi networks.

Sufism's expansion included women. Some Sufi leaders educated their sisters, wives, daughters, and other female relatives and inducted them into the orders. These women in turn brought other women into the order through gender-segregated activities in their homes. As women joined the movements, Sufi leaders often allowed mixing of the sexes at public events, such as celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and devotional sessions; women usually wore modest clothing styles, taking their cue from local standards for Muslim dress. These gatherings nevertheless attracted criticism from some Muslims, resulting in greater gender segregation over time. In Somalia, for example, the twentieth century saw the rise of women's Sufi events where women recited *sittaat*, hymns invoking notable women from the early history of Islam; the women believed these figures might assist with their fertility or childbirth concerns.

Other Muslims contributed to Islam's expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. In rural areas, former slaves returned to their regions of origin and sometimes carried the faith of their masters with them, refashioning it in new contexts. In towns, Muslim Africans met non-Muslims in their service as police officers or colonial clerks and convinced some to join the faith. Other Muslims founded urban associations to support Arabic-language schools. Muslim missionaries from abroad were active too. For example, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, founded in the late nineteenth century by the Indian Muslim Ghulam Ahmad, sent a small number of South Asian missionaries to Africa, where they converted Africans and worked with them to found schools and translate the Qur'an into African languages. Muslims usually have not translated the Qur'an, but others followed the Ahmadi example: most notably, the East African scholar Abd Allah Salih al-Farsi translated selected passages of the Qur'an into Kiswahili and added it to his instructional pamphlets in Kiswahili about performing Muslim rituals. The Muslim world in sub-Saharan Africa was alive with efforts to expand the faith and to provide the requisite knowledge for the growing number of new Muslim converts.

In northern Africa European imperialism led to shifts in political consciousness. Secular nationalism was a strong current, but Islam was another. In Egypt, for example, Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher, founded the Muslim Brotherhood

(al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) in 1928 to stress conservative Muslim values while providing social welfare through health clinics and social cooperatives. The Muslim Brotherhood opposed British colonial rule, and its military wing engaged in bombings and assassinations in the 1940s, culminating in al-Banna's death in a retaliatory killing and the banning of the movement by the authorities. The Muslim Brotherhood eventually disavowed violence, but its early history influenced one of its members, Sayyid Qutb, to write influential texts about armed Muslim opposition to corrupt rulers that have influenced extremist Islamists to this day.

Recent Developments

Independence brought new challenges to African Muslims. South of the Sahara in particular, Muslims found themselves at a disadvantage vis-à-vis Christians as positions opened in state bureaucracies for individuals literate in European languages adopted as national languages in postcolonial Africa: Christians had access to mission schools to learn European languages, but the colonial state often had not provided an extensive network of Western-style schools in Muslim areas. Postcolonial states also stressed secularism, stirring emotions among some Muslims who perceived these changes as undermining religious autonomy. Recent Muslim calls for greater implementation of sharia in part reflect these changing circumstances. Sharia (the word is often translated as "Islamic law") refers to Muslim legal processes that developed over the centuries. Recent uses of sharia sometimes include instances of turning to Islamic legal manuals produced by classical jurists to apply a rigid code with specific punishments for certain crimes, but the practice of sharia also is nuanced, as it has been for centuries. Muslims acknowledge that the ultimate judge, God, is forgiving, thus allowing for latitude in juridical decisions and punishments.

A new wave of Muslim reformism has swept across postcolonial Africa. Global Muslim influences are evident, such as Salafism, named for a diverse group of Islamic movements that stress the precedents of the *salaf*, Arabic for "ancestors," including the Prophet Muhammad and his initial followers. Emphasis on the example of *salaf* has deep roots in the Muslim world, and many credit the rise of contemporary Salafism to the evangelism of the eighteenth-century Saudi reformer Abd al-Wahhab and the nineteenth-century Muslim scholars Muhammad Abduh, Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani, and Rashid Rida. In its contemporary expressions African Muslim reformers draw on these ideas and also put their own intellectual effort into addressing local problems with a scripturalism that emphasizes knowledge of Arabic and promotes the Qur'an and Traditions as a basis for fostering piety in social life. African Muslim reformers criticize most Sufi leaders, whom the reformers see as fostering unacceptable innovations in religious practice. Reformers argue in vernacular languages for their text-based understandings and adopt new media to communicate with a mass audience, no longer emphasizing the intimate face-to-face encounters of Sufism. In many cases, these reformers founded Arabic-language



Figure 5.3. Mosque association praying for safe travel on the hajj in early twenty-first-century Senegal.
Beth Buggenhagen.

schools that have adopted an instructional method breaking from the rote memorization found in the established Qur'anic schools run by Sufis and other African Muslims. Transnational networks provide African reformers with access to resources; Arabic-language schools, in particular, benefit from financial support from oil-wealthy governments in Arabia and elsewhere, and their top students often gain fellowships to further their studies abroad. The willingness of some African states to include Arabic-language schools in the national educational system also expands opportunities for employment. Educational assistance, however, is merely one element of support that flows from Arabia and Iran; medical clinics and other humanitarian assistance are provided as well. Arabian assistance often leads to greater adherence to Salafist ideas, and Iranian assistance has supported small Shi'i communities in Africa.

Sufi orders and other Muslim movements that grew in the colonial era have continued to play a role in religious life. While Sufi orders have lost influence in some regions, they remain vital in others, using new media for proselytizing. In Senegal, for example, the Muridiyya expanded from its initial base in rural Senegal to add a presence in Dakar and other Senegalese urban areas. The annual pilgrimage to Touba, the spiritual center of the Muridiyya movement, remains a focus, and Sufi leaders regularly tour urban areas, including cities such as New York and Paris where

immigrants have settled and rely on recordings of Sufi litanies and other new media to keep their faith alive. Sufi orders have remained active in eastern Africa as well, such as in Tanzania, where the orders still are the most widespread and popular Muslim organizations. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community's efforts continue in Africa: beginning in the 1970s, the Service to Humanity Scheme has increased access to educational and health services in Africa through development projects funded by donations from Ahmadi Muslims worldwide and led by local Ahmadi members and expatriate Ahmadi volunteers committing themselves to working for a set period in Africa.

In northern Africa the Muslim Brotherhood and other Muslim movements have emerged as major political forces in the aftermath of recent protests that swept entrenched governments from power. The protests began in Tunisia in 2010 after a fruit vendor set himself on fire, provoking mass demonstrations against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who from 1987 oversaw a repressive state apparatus and economic policies that did not benefit the masses. The protests removed Ben Ali from power in January 2011 and sparked other protests in the region. In Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak also had promoted state repression and economic liberalism, protesters adopted strategies from their Tunisian counterparts, such as using social media to organize nonviolent civil resistance through the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo. The Muslim Brotherhood joined the protests and offered support as the movement removed President Mubarak from power in 2011. The transitions in Egypt and Tunisia are not complete: in their immediate aftermath Muslim political parties, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda (a political movement inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood) in Tunisia, won elections and assumed the task of governing, but in 2013 military action swept the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt and saw new protests challenging the Ennahda government in Tunisia. In Libya the influence of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests resulted in the ouster of longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi, but only after the Libyan resistance waged an insurgent military campaign aided by international airpower. The aftermath of the Libyan uprising did not lead to a stable, centralized government: many groups, including those advocating reformist Islam, are competing for influence in the postrevolutionary era.

Militant Muslim movements have emerged in contemporary Africa. The recent events in northern Africa, for example, have triggered an uprising south of the Sahara. As discussed in the chapter on African politics, Tuareg separatist groups in Mali, joined by Tuareg fighters fleeing Libya with arms from Qaddafi's weapons caches, recently waged an insurgent campaign in northern Mali. Ansar Dine, one of the Tuareg insurgent groups, is a Muslim militia that made an alliance with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, an Algerian group now recruiting young Muslim men from across the region to fight in the Mali conflict. In Nigeria, the Muslim group known as Boko Haram embarked a campaign of bombings, initially targeting the police but later attacking United Nations offices and Christian churches; some Nigerian Muslim leaders who condemned Boko Haram's militant tactics

have been assassinated by this shadowy group. In Somalia, two decades of civil unrest led to the rise of Al-Shabab, a Somali Muslim militia formed to support the Union of Islamic Courts, a grassroots movement that sought to erode the power of armed Somali clan leaders. When Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006 to dislodge the Union of Islamic Courts, Al-Shabab fought the Ethiopians and gained popular support; it took control of much of southern Somalia in 2009 when Ethiopia withdrew its forces. Once in power Al-Shabab rule was strict in its application of a literalist interpretation of the Qur'an, leading quickly to the loss of popular support among Somalis. Its leadership also organized terrorist bombings in Uganda and developed an internet presence advocating global jihad. Omar Hammami, an Alabama native and convert to Islam, for example, migrated to Somali and composed hip-hop lyrics about dying for Al-Shabab's cause. Kenya and Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2010, and while Al-Shabab lost control in towns, it remains a force in some rural areas: a radical leadership consolidated control, purging members such as Omar Hammami through assassinations, and embarked on acts of terrorism in Somalia's towns and elsewhere, such as the 2013 assault on a Kenyan shopping mall. In contexts outside Al-Shabab control, however, Somali Sufi orders are reemerging as influential groups. The activities of Al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and Ansar Dine attract attention as radical groups using force to impose their interpretations of Islam on others, but most African Muslims engage in peaceful religious advocacy and are tolerant of religious pluralism in Africa.

Africa's Muslim communities, long established on the continent, grew in numbers and influence during the past two hundred years. Sufi orders led reformist efforts in the nineteenth century and, after European colonial intervention, turned to expanding the numbers of the faithful through proselytism. These conversions encouraged local engagements with Islam, but homogenizing pressures are mounting as a result of increased interactions between Africa and the rest of the Muslim world. African Muslim reformers resolve tensions between local and global Islamic currents through the adoption of forms of Muslim piety based on readings of the Qur'an and connections to affluent regions of the Muslim world. But Sufism remains significant in some contexts, and other forms of Muslim religious expression continue to be relevant. In northern Africa Muslim movements have benefited from regime change to contest elections and come to political power. In a few contexts, such as Mali and Somalia, radical Muslim movements embracing a militant agenda have arisen, using force to impose an interpretation of Islam not shared by most others.

Religions in Africa are diverse and dynamic. Religions with African roots draw on rich pasts as they respond to contemporary efforts to represent their actions as irrelevant. Christianity's long history in Africa produced numerous congregations of Orthodox, mainline, African independent, and evangelical Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Islam has similar longevity and vitality, with Sufi, reformist, and other Muslim movements defining the contemporary scene. Religions with African

roots have spread to diaspora communities in the Americas and elsewhere, and global interactions keep African Muslims and Christians in contact with others in their faiths. Africans will continue to elaborate on religious ideas and practices as they make religion relevant to their lives.

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